Small and Medium-Sized Public Libraries

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CURRENTLY THE HUMAN POPULATION of the world is increasing at about 45 million people a year. This figure becomes more meaningful when we reflect that a mere four years of such growth is all that is necessary to equal the population of the United States. Indeed someone with a fondness for mathematical computation has calculated that at the end of six hundred years there will be one person for every square meter of earth.

In the United States alone the next four years will see an increase of more than 11 million people or enough to match the 1960 population of Pennsylvania. In the next 20 years this country will add about 66 million people, or enough to equal all those now populating the four large states of New York, California, Pennsylvania, and Illinois, plus those in the whole East South Central Division, comprising the states of Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, and Mississippi.

For convenience, the medium-sized public library is defined here as one serving a city or place with a population of 35,000 to 100,000 and the small public library as one serving a village or place with a population of fewer than 35,000. A third group may occasionally be identified as very small, to indicate those public libraries serving populations of fewer than 5,000.

In 1960 there were approximately 8,190 public libraries in the United States. Latest available estimates supplied by the Library Services Branch, U.S. Office of Education, show that 4,657 of these served populations under 5,000, 2,625 served between 5,000 and 35,000 people, and 657 served populations between 35,000 and 100,000.

The Hauser-Taitel article appearing in the previous issue [1] discusses in detail the implications of the 1960 census, emphasizing those demographic aspects which have particular significance for the development of libraries. The Hauser-Taitel projections are based upon key

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assumptions regarding fertility levels, death rates, immigration, and national catastrophe.

By and large, public libraries serving population groups under 35,000 have insufficient funds to provide recognized minimum standards of library service. Book collections are small, hours of service inadequate, and trained staff nonexistent or spread too thin to be truly effective. The most significant effect of population change upon these libraries during the next twenty years will be the one of growth. Many of them will become "medium-sized," and hence, with increased income along with other factors, a little better able to provide for library needs of the community.

The places and the libraries which will be most affected by the sheer impact of growth will of course be those which are now a part of the great urban fringes. If the current trend in suburbanization continues, as it is predicted, in two decades many of these small libraries will be serving population groups several times their present size. As these libraries slip over 35,000 into the next population class, those with commensurate incomes may well develop a depth and flexibility of service capable of responding to some of the more subtle demands of population change. The potential extent of this growth nation-wide may be roughly gauged by noting that from 1950 to 1960 the number of places in urban fringes with populations of 35,000 to 100,000 increased from 244 to 380. That this movement will continue at an accelerated pace is borne out by the predictions of population increase in and around urban areas.

Some of the smaller governmental units in urban areas, however, have already approached maximum growth within their boundaries and are so hemmed in by surrounding units that there is little or no opportunity to annex and expand. In the nonurban areas, many of the small places, especially those in the 5,000-or-less population group, will not gain a sufficient tax base under the predicted patterns of growth to permit their public libraries to achieve the minimums of service. Again, some measure of the growth of small places may be gained by noting that from 1950 to 1960 the number of places of fewer than 35,000 population increased from 18,264 to 19,279, while about 161 such places moved beyond the 35,000 mark. It is important to note that these figures refer to *places* and make no distinction between those with and those without public libraries.

Although the libraries in these small places may not have sufficient breadth and flexibility of service to respond to other kinds of popula-

tion change within their boundaries, they will nonetheless feel the effect of such change. Change in age structure is a prime example. The population projection to 1980 shows for all age groups an increase of 37 per cent over 1960. Against this figure can be compared the increase of 48.9 per cent for the age group 65 years and over. Further, present trends indicate that members of this group tend to retire to suburban and rural nonfarm areas.[2] Since our senior citizens are reportedly devoting more of their leisure hours to a wide range of recreational, cultural, and educational activities, the implications to library service are clear. Where library service is comprehensive, suitable adaptations may be made to serve the special needs of the group; in smaller places, although some adaptation may be possible, it is likely that the more significant effect will be an exertion of pressure upon local authorities for an improvement in library service.

Even greater demands for public library service may be expected from the other end of the age structure. While the middle-age groups remain relatively stable until 1980, those under 30 years of age show sharp increases over the norm. Particularly significant projections are those for the age groups 14 to 17, 18 to 21, and 22 to 29, which show respective increases of 44.4, 73.0, and 83.8 per cent as compared with the norm of 37 per cent. When these projections are visualized in terms of school enrollment, it becomes clear that student demands upon the public library as a supplementary and, in some cases, as a primary resource will reach proportions unknown to present experience. To this should be added the greatly increased population of children below the age of 14, which will also require increased public library services and expenditures.

Changes in educational attainment for all persons in these two decades are predicted in terms of high school and college graduates. In 1960 51.5 million people over 18 years of age, or 44.7 per cent of the total, were high school graduates. The projection for 1980 shows 95.1 million, or 58.9 per cent, with high school diplomas, an increase of 14.2 per cent in twenty years. Although less rapid in growth, the number of college graduates shows a steady increase from 7.6 to 10.4 per cent of the population over 22 years of age during the same period. Even though a correlation between educational attainment and the use of public libraries would be too complex to express in a single quantitative ratio, it seems safe to assume that the upward trend in the educational level of the people will in general produce an increased demand for library service.

During the decade 1950 to 1960 several changes occurred in the major occupation groups of employed persons which have significance to the use of libraries. Against an increase of 11.6 per cent shown for all employed persons 14 years old and over, there is an increase in professional and technical workers of 66.4 per cent or nearly 55 per cent over the norm.[3, 4] If the number of professional workers continues to increase at this rate or, indeed, if they simply hold to the norm for the next two decades, libraries may also expect from this source a considerable increase in the demand for service.

The combined effect of these projected changes in population upon the small library must inevitably be to emphasize further the inadequacy of its service or, to put it in another way, it will become increasingly clear that an acceptable level of modern library service can rarely be achieved by a taxing unit with fewer than 35,000 population.

The medium-sized public library will be exposed to much the same effects of population change. If it is assumed, however, that the medium-sized library more nearly meets minimum library standards for housing, organization, and service, it is obviously in a better position to tackle the problems of increased demand. While the small library will still be very much concerned with increasing, say, hours of service, the medium-sized library will be able to turn some of its attention to the more special needs of the senior citizen, the professional worker, and the student.

Many small and the medium-sized libraries will be affected by their proximity to urbanized areas. Any suburban library may expect demands upon its services according to the population characteristics of the central city and its pattern of library service. And those public libraries lying within fringe and potential fringe areas of the great urban developments must expect their communities to mushroom to near absolute capacity by 1980.

Hauser and Taitel indicate that growth patterns during the two decades will vary widely among the major geographical divisions of the country, from a low of 7.8 per cent increase for the East South Central Division to a high of 62.2 per cent for the Pacific Division. Here, of course, migration is the significant factor with climactic and economic advantages providing the major incentives.

Since projections for each geographic division show absolute increases in population, it follows that libraries generally will experience increasing demands for their services. Changes in age structure,

school enrollment, educational attainment, and occupation must necessarily affect all libraries to some degree, and where these factors of normal growth are combined with a strong pattern of in-migration, the library may count on a dramatic increase in the demands that will be made upon it.

Library trustees and administrators must view these changes with considerable concern. Any assumption that present levels of service will do for tomorrow ignores the basic implications of the projected population changes. It is not simply a matter of more population but one of more population differently structured. A constant per capita income will not provide for an increasing per capita demand.

A more serious concern is manpower. Today we know from experience that funds to hire qualified personnel are useless if these people are unavailable. If the current trend toward personnel shortages continues, and the evidence is that it will, the problem of supplying increased demand for library service during the next two decades assumes gargantuan proportions.

Let us consider for a moment the small public library. Under the most benign circumstances, the small public library today is already losing ground in its efforts to provide minimum standard service to the community. Turn as it will, it cannot escape the fact that basic library service costs more than the small community can afford to pay. This is scarcely a new problem, but the trustees and administrators of small public libraries must expect it to be considerably aggravated during the next twenty years, and they must find solutions to cope with it effectively.

In the opinion of this author, the future of the small public library lies through affiliation with the expanding development of larger units of service. Granted that present library service patterns for the multi-jurisdictional areas produce some very real problems of their own, it is equally evident that they provide a greater number of people with more library service.

The authorities responsible for the small public library, therefore, will be wise to plan now for cooperative library services in whatever pattern is most feasible and appropriate to the communities and jurisdictions involved. (Particularly à propos is the Henderson article in this issue). They will do well to discover as quickly as possible that centralization of some services does not necessarily mean loss of ownership and autonomy and that it does mean a greatly improved library service for the community.

The medium-sized public library must be concerned equally with centralization of services and financial support if it hopes to cope successfully with increased demand. The medium-sized community that serves as the center of a large area may well consider itself the nucleus in the establishment of a larger unit of service and may hope to strengthen its own service thereby. Where several medium-sized communities exist in relative proximity, some form of library consolidation or federation may be indicated. Again, the medium-sized library serving a suburban community may find cooperative or contractual arrangements with the central city productive of improved service.

Any consideration of the projected growth and changes in population during the next twenty years yields the one general but inescapable conclusion that the per capita demand for library service must greatly exceed that of 1960. This demand will make it more necessary than ever before for the small public library to seek a means of increasing its service through some form of cooperation with other libraries—or face the fact that its resources will become ever less capable of meeting the needs of its community.

The medium-sized public library may be faced with the same problem—except for those whose communities will grow so rapidly that they move well into the class of the large public library. While the medium-sized public library might be able to make some adjustments in depth, it will not find it easy to cope with a sharp increase in per capita demand. The sheer quantity of service required may so burden the medium-sized public library that it, too, will have to look for assistance through large-scale cooperation or become less and less able to supply the community.

It seems evident that the small public library will virtually disappear as a self-contained unit. State laws and state and federal aid will so encourage the development of large units of service that the small library will not be able to justify an unaffiliated status.

In these large units, the small public library, serving as an outlet, will be almost wholly devoted to patron services. While it may retain local leadership, its administrative and technical services will be centralized. Comparatively speaking, it will be giving the best possible service for the dollar spent.

The medium-sized public library will also be a part of a large unit of service or a system of libraries. It may differ here from the small library only in the form of participation. Medium-sized libraries which

are dominant in the unit of service will act as headquarters for administrative, technical, and related services. Particularly those in the metropolitan areas will be members of a system of libraries in which each will retain desirable minimums of local control.

In systems or larger units of service, much of the work of professional librarians will be to direct untrained or semitrained personnel in the improved performance of their activities. Personnel in the administrative, technical, and distributive services will be largely nonprofessional.

The large unit of service will engage in economic mass production of technical aids and tools. It will unite and make available the total library resources of the unit through the most economical and effective means of communication.

These directions toward total library service are actually current. It is idle to guess how many years must pass before they will be common throughout the land, but it seems certain that in the next twenty years the movement will have become necessary and massive.

References

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3. U.S. Bureau of the Census: *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1960.* Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1961, pp. 205-216.

4. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics: *Monthly Report on the Labor Force: December 1960.* Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1961, Table 20.